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ABSTRACT

Current concepts and realities of comprehensive planning act as a backdrop for a discussion of the types and sources of information required to support components of institutional planning processes. Information to support components of the planning process are outlined in relation to practical opportunities and to the intent, commitment, and knowledge of those involved in the formulation and implementation of an institutional plan. Comprehensive planning is commonly viewed as a formal, systematic, and rational procedure which involves processes of setting or identifying general goals; defining specific objectives aimed at the goals; developing continuing or altering specific objectives aimed at the goals; developing continuing or altering programs to meet the objectives; monitoring the results; and feeding back information for decisions that might adjust the programs, objectives, or goals. Practical experience with this theoretical view of planning indicates strategies used to generate planning information. Specific examples that have been used at The University of Calgary are presented. (Author)

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INFORMATION STRATEGIES FOR AN INSTITUTIONAL PLANNING PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

INFORMATION STRATEGIES FOR AN INSTITUTIONAL PLANNING PROCESS

by

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Current concepts and realities of comprehensive planning act as a backdrop for a discussion of the types and sources of information required to support components of institutional planning processes.

Information to support components of the planning process are outlined in relation to practical opportunities as well as in relation to the intent, commitment and knowledge of those involved in the formulation and implementation of an institutional plan. Comprehensive planning is commonly viewed as a formal, systematic and rational procedure which involves processes of setting or identifying general goals; defining specific objectives aimed at the goals; developing continuing or altering programs to meet the objectives; monitoring the results and feeding back information for decisions which might adjust the programs, objectives or goals.

Practical experience with this theoretical view of planning indicates strategies used to generate planning information. Specific examples that have been used at The University of Calgary are presented.

It is convenient to slice into this topic by regarding institutional planning processes as activities which involve people participating in a group. This view allows us to consider four features of institutional planning which provide a focus for discussion.

1. The group and its leader have a clear understanding of what is to be achieved, and there is agreement and commitment to try to achieve it.
2. The knowledge and the skill of the group.
3. The tools available to the group.
4. Circumstances beyond control of the group.

At the outset we must admit to each other that this notion of "group" is not simple. The people who make up this group are not depicted as an entity on any organizational chart. From among the many participants in institutional planning, the group to which I refer includes those people within the institution who can affect the quality of the process, and who have considerable influence or authority in deciding what, if anything, will result from the process. Of course, there are outside of this institutional group, people who have significant or ultimate influence on institutional decisions, and for many aspects of institutional planning these people are part of the "circumstances beyond control of the group."

Institutional researchers, planners and executive officers have come to know that group understanding, agreement and commitment is rare, and cannot be forced. We know also that unpredictable events or circumstances beyond our control will always restrict a planning process in achieving what theory says it could. We therefore tend to concentrate, as I will today, on the second and third features of our focus, with the hope that we

can increase chances for understanding those things which can and should be achieved, and will decrease somewhat the number of uncertainties.

The knowledge, skills and tools will relate to three aspects of institutional planning. One aspect involves providing the basic framework information to the institutional planning group. Another issue involves what we mean by "priorities," and a third idea relates to identification of interrelationships between and among programs and academic units in a way that can guide and document long and tortuous planning discussions and decisions.

First, it is necessary to provide a background from which to view these ideas. Let us establish the customary agreement that effective institutional planning is not so much dependent upon information as it is upon the first feature that has been set out, particularly the members who make up the "group and its leader." The experience from which I speak involves a planning process which is heavily participatory and involves planning or policy committees and academic and administrative personnel, whose members, when making recommendations or decisions, must live with the dilemma of what is good for them versus what is good for the institution. This dilemma manifests itself in their willingness to engage in a process that falls somewhere between an absence of systematic planning and a presence of highly detailed documents which suggest "future control." Keep in mind also, that planning participants from competing constituencies do not or cannot clarify or agree upon an important matter which underlies this year's Forum theme--that is, the distinction among words such as "needs," "resources," "wants" and "allowances."

In our own institution, efforts to establish reasonable understanding and commitment on what was to be achieved were typical of most institutional

planning processes of the "top-down" and "bottom-up" variety. The first step was to have broad participation in the production of a rather brief, general university development plan. Distribution of this document outside the institution provided communication to the public and government. Within the institution, the document outlined general institutional goals and served as a framework for preparation of more detailed plans in academic and support units. The second step required a commitment of the planning committee and all deans and support unit heads to the task of preparing and reviewing more detailed five-year plans for their units.

Our planning environment was not conducive to having deans and other officers fill in the blanks of prescribed cook-book formats and schedules, even though many of these planning formats have considerable merit. However, if unit plans were to come forward in a free response style, it was clear that the following intentions of the planning committee would not be served.

1. to obtain explicit statements from each unit on their objectives, program proposals, and priorities
2. to identify interrelationships among units' plans
3. to reduce the "lists for Santa Claus" mentality (Cohen & March, 1974)
4. to examine and assess each plan in an effective and organized manner, with the respective dean or support unit head
5. to consolidate priorities and to guide resource commitments, including the annual budget determination.

With the establishment of reasonable understanding and commitment on what was to be achieved, efforts were then directed to supplementing the knowledge, skill, and tools for the task. Planning information support for this phase of the process included efforts to ensure that all players were starting from "GO." Of the dozens of ways we could communicate to the "group" the conceptual

basis of our comprehensive institutional planning effort, we developed and circulated Figure 1. By changing the participants in the left-hand column, one can visualize the planning process at the departmental or even system level. The centre column in Figure 1 is loaded with words to trigger in one's mind the kinds of information and action which can affect institutional planning, and the right-hand column summarized the main components of planning activity. In total, Figure 1 illustrated what people could identify with as a rational process, and it flagged for the veteran participants where the process would run across some rocky grounds.

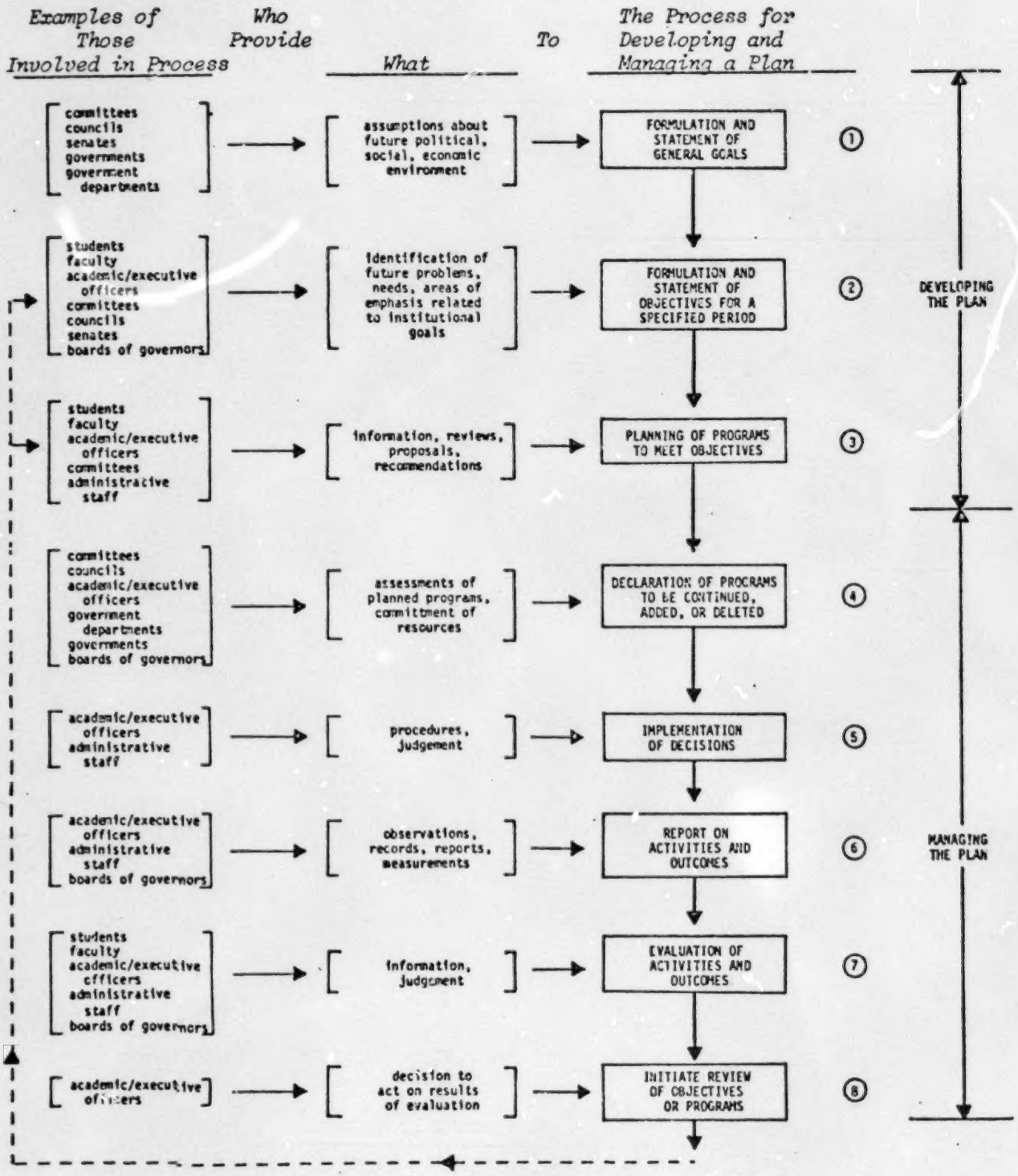
Along with the general planning process illustration went an information package to each Dean including the following:

1. a brief statement of the purpose of unit plans--to focus on their use in determining priorities and related resource allocations
2. a context for plans--to indicate the effort was not a start from square one in the sense of re-planning all programs
3. three general resource assumptions with the likely one noted--to start to reduce the Santa Claus lists
4. detailed projections of enrolment and staff workload levels with related questions - to further reduce the Christmas wishes
5. a general format for plans, including what was meant by the terms "objectives" and "program plans"--to ensure some measure of consistency among plans.

In anticipation of some of the units requesting assistance in the preparation of their plans, there was prepared a sample plan for a fictitious academic unit--a so-called School of Forestry. In this fiction was included several ways to present some of the more difficult concepts of institutional planning. Material sent to units included explanations which elaborated

FIGURE 1

CHARACTERISTICS OF A GENERAL PLANNING PROCESS
(INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL)


Examples of Those Involved in Process
Who Provide
What
To
The Process for Developing and Managing a Plan
committees, councils, senates, governments, government departments
assumptions about future political, social, economic environment
FORMULATION AND STATEMENT OF GENERAL GOALS
1
students, faculty, academic/executive officers, committees, councils, senates, boards of governors
identification of future problems, needs, areas of emphasis related to institutional goals
FORMULATION AND STATEMENT OF OBJECTIVES FOR A SPECIFIED PERIOD
2
DEVELOPING THE PLAN
students, faculty, academic/executive officers, committees, administrative staff
information, reviews, proposals, recommendations
PLANNING OF PROGRAMS TO MEET OBJECTIVES
3
committees, councils, academic/executive officers, government departments, governments, boards of governors
assessments of planned programs, committment of resources
DECLARATION OF PROGRAMS TO BE CONTINUED, ADDED, OR DELETED
4
academic/executive officers, administrative staff
procedures, judgement
IMPLEMENTATION OF DECISIONS
5
academic/executive officers, administrative staff, boards of governors
observations, records, reports, measurements
REPORT ON ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES
6
MANAGING THE PLAN
students, faculty, academic/executive officers, administrative staff, boards of governors
information, judgement
EVALUATION OF ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES
7
academic/executive officers
decision to act on results of evaluation
INITIATE REVIEW OF OBJECTIVES OR PROGRAMS
8

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certain characteristics of objectives and programs.

We were aware, for example, that consensus on an objective, at least among those who can directly influence efforts toward the objective, is a necessary condition for its achievement. We also knew that an objective should be stated unambiguously, with sufficient substance to imply the consequences of its pursuit. Unfortunately, the need for consensus and the requirement of specificity, are often antagonistic to each other, because as objectives become sharpened, the threats to various interest groups increase. Regardless of this difficulty we knew units would certainly be facing a planning committee that would seek to identify policies, resources, programs and other activities related to objectives. Figure 2 was provided to illustrate the types of questions that might occur.

Another complex area that was explored with respect to objectives involved the problem of establishing priorities among them. The ordering of priorities in educational institutions is usually based, at least in form if not in substance, on "academic" rather than "financial" considerations, and the "statement of priorities" is a number of items listed in order of importance. In the sphere of policy analysis and evaluation, this type of ordering of priorities has been referred to as the "naive priorities method" (Braybrooke and Lindblom, 1963).

Practical experience suggests that when financial implications of specific academic objectives become clearly known, priorities tend to become established on the basis of resource and policy constraints. A simple example in Figure 3 will serve to illustrate the point. Suppose three objectives, P, Q, R, have different cost implications and are regarded as being independent of each other. On "academic" grounds P is given first priority, Q second, and R third, but when the financial realities are made

FIGURE 2

ITEMS/TOPICS WHICH MAY BEAR UPON OBJECTIVES,
PROGRAMS AS DESCRIBED IN UNIT PLANS

IS THERE INFORMATION WHICH SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN PLANS WHICH RELATED THE UNIT'S *OBJECTIVES* TO . . . ?

- the nature of the unit's basic task, for example,

university
local area
regional
national
international

aspirations
needs
obligations
arrangements
agreements
authorizations
policies
mandates
requirements

perceived
or
stated

- topics in the university plan, for example,

specialized/general studies
interdisciplinary studies
part-time students
educational settings and methods
cooperation/exchange with other institutions
program quality improvement
programs/activities for general community
access/outreach
research institutes, centres, groups
physical environment
increased effectiveness
cost savings

IS THERE INFORMATION WHICH SHOULD BE INCLUDED WHICH RELATES *PROGRAM PROPOSALS* TO . . . ?

- University objectives
- Unit objectives
- resource requirements
- alternatives/trade-offs
- implications for other units
- timing/phasing

FIGURE 3

A PRIORITY/RESOURCE RELATIONSHIP

OBJECTIVE	PRIORITY ORDER OF OBJECTIVES	COST IMPLICATIONS OF OBJECTIVES	SAMPLE DISTRIBUTIONS IF TOTAL FUNDS = 15		
			CASE A	CASE B	CASE C
P	1	20	0	15	9
Q	2	10	10	0	4
R	3	5	5	0	2

CASE A: "P" becomes sacrificed, and probably remains number one priority for "next time."

CASE B: The activities leading to objective "P" are made more economical, or the objective is modified, but "P" is top priority as the allocation shows.

CASE C: This is an example of "sharing the poverty," where none of the objectives as prescribed will be achieved, but they will all be pursued in some reduced form.

known, the costs of P cannot be met. Actual resolutions of problems of this type are more intricate than the cases outlined in Figure 3. However, the examples indicate how implementation of academic priorities depends upon levels of financing, and how the iterative processes required to link available finances to stated objectives can alter academic priorities.

Notwithstanding the likelihood that the statements of priorities in unit plans would reflect strategic considerations of "which one will fly," the information provided in Figure 4 allowed units to consider a simple method of portraying their priorities in relation to resource levels which could be delineated in general terms. Of course, as the knowledge of available resources became more specific, priorities would change. For example, if resources slightly less than Level 3 were made available, a low cost program would be dropped before a higher cost program of more significance to the School and the University.

The body of the chart in the top section of Figure 4 gave an assessment, for different levels of resources, of whether the program quality could be implemented and sustained at a "high" or "adequate" level, or whether it would be "inoperable" in view of total available resources.

Also in the sample plan was an information technique that could be used to communicate linkages between organizational units and programs. The chart in the lower half of Figure 4 illustrated the degree of involvement of various departments, given a "Level 3" resource assumption.

As one would expect, the planning submissions from the units varied considerably in style and extent of detail. However, the basic format which required statements of objectives and program plans made it possible to develop summaries that allowed a consistent and orderly analysis by the planning committee. The summaries, illustrated in Figure 5 "mapped" the interrelationships among university objectives, as contained in the general

FIGURE 4

ILLUSTRATION OF RANKING PROGRAM PRIORITIES
GIVEN DIFFERENT LEVELS OF RESOURCES

PROGRAM	PRIMARY EMPHASIS	RESOURCE LEVEL AND PROGRAM STATUS: LEVEL 3 CAPITAL/ OPERATING	LEVEL 2 CAPITAL/ OPERATING	LEVEL 1 CAPITAL/ OPERATING	LEVEL 1 CAPITAL/ LEVEL 0 OPERATING	LEVEL 1 CAPITAL/ LEVEL (-1) OPERATING
FOREST CAMP SCHOOL	instr	high	high	adeq	adeq	adeq
FACULTY EXCHANGE	instr	high	high	high	adeq	inop
PUBLIC INFORMATION PROGRAM	public serv	high	high	adeq	adeq	inop
FACULTY RESEARCH UNIT	research	high	adeq	inop	inop	inop
PART-TIME STUDENT OPPORTUNITIES	instr	adeq	adeq	inop	inop	inop

ILLUSTRATION OF DEPARTMENT/PROGRAM RELATIONSHIPS

SCHOOL OF FORESTRY DEPARTMENTAL INVOLVEMENT
WITH "LEVEL 3" RESOURCES

● = MAJOR ◉ = MINOR ○ = NONE

PROGRAM	PRIMARY EMPHASIS	FOREST ECOLOGY	FOREST BIOLOGY	FORESTRY ADMINISTRATION
FOREST CAMP SCHOOL	instr	●	●	◉
FACULTY EXCHANGE	instr	◉	◉	○
PUBLIC INFORMATION PROGRAM	public serv	◉	○	●
FACULTY RESEARCH UNIT	research	●	●	◉
PART-TIME STUDENT OPPORTUNITIES	instr	◉	◉	●

FIGURE 5

RELATIONSHIP OF UNIT PLANNING PROPOSALS
TO UNIT AND UNIVERSITY OBJECTIVES

PLANNING PROPOSALS OF THE SCHOOL OF FORESTRY	SCHOOL OBJECTIVES TO WHICH PROPOSAL RELATES	UNIVERSITY OBJECTIVES TO WHICH PROPOSAL RELATES	NOTES
a. Establish an on-site summer Forest Camp School in the Jasper area.	[A,C,D]	[4.2]	instructional time sufficient ?
b. Provide a summer program of part-time instruction at Jasper for parks personnel.	[C,D]	[4.1]	✓
c. Retain three sessional positions for visiting lecturers and establish a "faculty exchange" program with other universities and colleges.	[F]	[6.1]	does Fac. Assoc. have a position on this?
d. Establish a School Research Unit at Jasper.	[G]	[3.3]	outside funding? what about cost sharing with Treetop U.?
e. Provide a summer Public Information Program at Jasper.	[H]	[7.1]	✓

institutional plan, and objectives and planning proposals in unit plans. In addition, the summary provided a worksheet format with "notes" space to record questions/answers and to document recommendations or decisions that evolved through discussion in the planning committee.

None of these methods of providing information accomplished the planner's dreams of precision. Indeed, most of the planning summaries could not accommodate the blurring which occurred between "ends" and "means" in the units' plans. Figure 5 reveals that separation of policies from programs was not possible, and the issue was dodged by using the term "planning proposal." However, some of the strategies used have allowed a fairly large planning group to handle in a coherent way some subtle planning concepts and an enormous amount of information. Administrative and academic officers also have the type of documentation which records key aspects of the process to date in a manner which can be related to annual budget decisions and to whatever capacity exists for balancing needs and resources in the longer term.

There is a lot of good work that can still be done to provide useful information for institutional planning. Better ways are needed to structure complex information that bears upon practical selection of priorities. However, a troublesome consideration remains for the information providers. Recall that the group planning effort which provided an initial focus for this discussion had a fourth feature--that of circumstances beyond the group's control. Institutional planning in the comprehensive sense alluded to earlier goes beyond the institution. Information strategies that clarify difficult issues and tough alternatives at various levels of detail must also accommodate matters of politics and trust on external fronts. Some of us are aware of punishments, rather than rewards, that have resulted from using too openly some planning information strategies. Thus, when considering further

opportunities for progress in providing information for institutional planning, we would be wise to caution ourselves as to ~~[redacted] to tell~~ who we tell, ~~as recent wisdom would have it, "If you think you see light at the end of the tunnel, you're probably facing the wrong direction."~~ what we tell, and how we tell it, because for some people sound travels faster than light.

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